Presence and the "Work" of Cultural Transmission in Folklore Studies[1]

Abstract

Writing about languages, Joshua Fishman (2006) says, "Do not leave your language alone." The idea is that language vitality requires efforts on the parts of its speakers. The same could well be said of culture. In the face of unprecedented threats—including (but not limited to), climate- and politically-induced migration, economic pressures, and the attractions of new forms of cultural production in an increasingly networked world—sustaining cultures and the communities that maintain them requires active, intentional work. Doing this work relies also on presence in and direct engagement with communities. Too often, however, I have encountered people simply resigned to cultural and linguistic shift. *Mei banfa* 没办法. *bkod pa med* བཀོད་པ་མེད།, "There's nothing to be done." Building on observations from fieldwork with Tibetans in Western China during the summer and fall of 2023, this article articulates a vision of cultural transmission that builds out from essential principles of presence and work.

Key words:

Transmission, Tradition, Individual and Tradition, Tibet, Yushu, Kham

[1] To Doc Vandermeer who many years ago taught me everything I've forgotten about physics and the little I remember. With thanks to the peer reviewers and editors, to Mark Bender for comments on earlier drafts, to the audiences at Mahidol University and Shandong University who listened to talks and seminars in which these ideas were developed, and to the artists, bards, and others who kindly shared their thoughts to make this article possible. Recognition is also due to UKRI for a generous Future Leaders Fellowship which has allowed the time and the mental space necessary to conduct this research and to write this article.

In Yushu City, the seat of Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Norbu, a former monk turned artist and entrepreneur sits in a small workshop with his wife, brother, and cousin, creating filigree Buddhist art. As a youth he had been trained in the family trade of more traditional Buddhist *thangka* painting, but later gave it up for the more innovative (and potentially lucrative) work of filigree, which he learned at a workshop run by Han Chinese artists. Like many in the rapidly developing region of Yushu, Norbu is an active businessman, and he also owns a travel business aimed at foreign tourists (which has largely dried up since the beginning of the Covid-19 Pandemic in 2019) and selling his own label of tourist-directed Tibetan products like incense and lip balm in slick packaging. Though business is alright, it is not booming.

Chatting in his workshop, however, it quickly became clear that he and his family had bigger concerns than getting a share of the rapidly expanding economic pie in the region. Instead, both he and his wife expressed persistent worries about changing language competences in the region. They had originally come from a small town in the country, and regularly speak Tibetan. His children, too, had spoken Tibetan when they were young, but since moving to the local prefectural seat in search of better schools, those children have stopped speaking Tibetan at home. A young relative had come from the countryside to stay with them, I was told, and their children had been completely unable to speak with him.[2] Norbu and his relatives feel helpless in the face of these changes. Between modern cartoons, social media, the allure of international sporting events, and restrictive education policies, they confess to feeling helpless and having little hope for the future of Tibetan language and culture. *Bkod pa yod ma*. 'There's nothing to be done.'

[2] In a study conducting with children from another region, Ward (forthcoming 2024) notes that these same issues are common across the Tibetan Plateau, where children in urban areas are quick to lose their Tibetan language competence after beginning formal schooling.

The conversation with Norbu feels like an extension of many conversations I have had across Tibetan communities in Qinghai Province. One woman expressed concern that her middle-school-aged son no longer wanted to spend evenings in the village chanting scriptures. Now he is mad about basketball. A professor at a local university expressed concern about policies requiring students to write theses in Mandarin instead of Tibetan, and administration plans to fold once-independent Tibetan studies departments into "National Studies" (Ch, *guoxue* 国学), a discipline previously limited to study of the country's Han majority, but now referring to all people in the Chinese nation. In communities like this, increasingly torn apart by the inter-linked ravages of colonialism, late-stage capitalism, and climate-induced migration (Richardson et al 2023, 186-9), the effort or the amount of energy required on the parts of individuals and communities to keep traditional practices alive—what will be discussed in this article as the "work" of cultural transmission—can sometimes feel insurmountable.

But these impressions also fail to harmonize with my own observations and conversations with young people. I've come across many teens and twenty-somethings speaking the local dialect of Tibetan. Yes, competences are changing: more Chinese loanwords are creeping into everyday speech, and many young people are less familiar with oral traditional performance registers. They may no longer learn Tibetan writing in school and many keenly feel this lack. But many Tibetan youth also express an ardent desire to protect their language and traditions (though the definition of 'protection' varies considerably): A young woman who is learning a painting tradition historically limited to men. A teenaged boy who makes documentaries about local intangible cultural traditions. A recent college graduate expresses his passion for translating local religious history. Where things feel potentially useful to their lives, many young people are adamant that they would

like to see traditions continue. There is a chance that the sample speaking to me is self-selected or modifies what they say to their perceptions of what I want to hear, but I get the impression that there is no lack of desire to "preserve" and "transmit" culture, whatever this may mean to the different people speaking to me.

These interactions (and many others like it) have caused me to consider the amount of energy required on the part of individuals and communities to ensure cultural transmission in the twenty-first century. The "work" it entails and the reasons people choose to invest their time and resources into this work (or not). In this essay, I forward the metaphor of work as a way of understanding the difficulties of transmission in the present, with specific reference to my own research on cultural sustainability in Tibetan areas of the People's Republic of China.

Recognizing "Work" in Transmission

For years, I naively thought that traditions largely took care of themselves. Major folkloristic works focus heavily on the aesthetic qualities of traditions and the unique abilities of their bearers. Hard work once went into winning turf and thatching huts, but ceilis in the North of Ireland are made to seem effortless in doing the important social work of building and maintaining communal bonds (Cashman 2008). Wang Xiangrong teaches students, but one is given the impression that little effort is needed to keep northern Shaanxi folksinging traditions present in people's lives (Gibbs 2019). North Carolina potter Daniel Johnston describes on several occasions the *work* he does to hone his craft, develop his business, and enter the art world (Glassie 2020), but the work of finding and training apprentices is treated more casually.

Throughout the record, the work of artfully singing the song, telling the story, giving the speech, of learning to make traditional clothing and food (and doing so), of organizing the festival, propitiating the deities—so much of it taught and learned informally—often goes overlooked. The emphasis on informal learning central to how we teach students to identify something as within the purview of folklore studies (see for example Sims and Stephens 2011, 3 and Bauman 2008, 32) also obscures our attention to the efforts necessary to pass traditions on to future generations.

Being white and male in a world where these things matter, I found little cause to question this absence of work and labor in this theorization. When I was young, much of the effort required to keep traditions alive was not expected of me in the way it often falls on elders and women. Similarly, when conducting fieldwork in Northeastern Tibet and China (largely patriarchal and gender segregated societies), much of the "work" people did to maintain traditions was largely hidden from me: as a foreign guest I was more often on display rather than privy to the goings-on backstage; as a male I was often exempted from the work of cooking and cleaning. In some cases, I probably just failed to observe it.

Primarily studying staged and scripted comedic performances, I can perhaps be forgiven for primarily seeing things that are quite obviously "front stage" (Goffman 1956) even after years of research. But moving my family first to the United States and then the United Kingdom, and faced with the question of how to raise a bi-cultural child with little contexts or communities (and no offline access to those communities during the Covid-19 pandemic), I came to realize the tremendous amount of intentional effort—of work—needed of me and my partner to keep our separate traditions alive; to transmit at least *some* sense of the linguistic and cultural roots that were physically inaccessible. In the absence of

a community, traditions all require considerable hidden labor: Thanksgiving feasts while living in the United Kingdom, Tibetan *losar* (New Year), and others.

Transmission, as a concept has a prominent (though sometimes awkward) place in folklore studies. The very assumption of vernacular knowledge as "survivals" (Tylor 1871), is practically baked into the discipline, implying the sense of transmission under threat and continuing in spite of any number of pressures. Though often un-stated, then, transmission is an essential part of our work as folklorists, as it underpins the very existence of the materials many of us study. It is thus extremely important to understand the ways that it does (and does not) happen.

The Latin etymology of transmission, combining the prefix *trans* "across" with the perfect passive participle form of the verb *mittere* "to release" or "to send," is similar to that of the term tradition.[3] But the emphasis on releasing or sending is suggestive not only of an individual carrying something, but also of another receiving that which is sent. This could be across both time (generationally) or space (regionally). This latter sense motivated those who promoted the "Finnish" historical geographic method. With comparisons of different versions in hopes of reconstructing the diachronic spread of a tradition or text and thereby locating its source. Very similar aims underpin van Sydow's concepts of "oicotypes" (or "ecotypes") with its attention to regional variants of a single tradition. These early examinations of the question of transmission focused on the spatial transmission of traditions, stemming from a nationalist impulse to scientifically identify the "true" origins of a tradition or tyle.[4]

[3] The etymology of "tradition" is well-worn territory. See Noyes 2009 for more.
[4] This is an impulse that folklorists are often eager to keep at an arm's distance in the present, Hasan-Rokem 2016.

Similarly, Linda Dégh and Andrew Vaszonyi (1975), noticed that information spread through communities in uneven ways as a result of individual carriers or bearers of that information. This non-linear "multi-conduit transmission" aimed to understand, again, how a tale, gossip, or bit of news circulates through a group or a network. From this perspective, there is a degree of self-selection in the people who opt to transmit a given piece of information. Similarly, there is—both within folklore and in psychology—a sense that generic characteristics of the text and emotional reaction may lend themselves particularly well to the transmission. With Cantwell's (1993) work on "ethnomimesis," transmission is treated as the result of habitual and customary practices. In other contexts, tinkers use riddles to elicit joy as they move from town to town (Noyes 2003b), while simple but emotional messages—both positive and negative—are seen as key to virality (Berger and Milkman 2012) in online contexts. Such emphasis on simplicity and emotionality also features implicitly in Bauman's (2008) definition of "the philology of the vernacular" in that texts are "memorable and therefore durable." This may be. But in my experiences, folklore travels differently in the twenty-first century. Links to important cultural values that communities wish to promote (sometimes in resistance to power, sometimes in response to incentives) also play important roles (as we will see below).

The turn towards performance and Bakhtinian translinguistics in North American folkloristics attempted to highlight the agency and artistry of individual speakers working within a "world of others' words." Tradition bearers (primarily "active" ones) became performers and artists who took responsibility both to the tradition and the audience for acts of communicative competence (Bauman 1977), and wielded political power in moving texts between different contexts (Bauman and Briggs 1990, Bauman 2004). Such decontextualization and recontextualization helped to ensure the sharing and spreading of

cultural form across time and space, but the emphasis was often on individual tellers or groups of tellers, rather than the intergenerational or interregional transmission of different tales.

As Zhang (2022) points out, such concerns are not limited to the world of Euro-American folklorists. Indeed, similar interests have cropped up in Chinese research of recent years, where the question of the ongoing transmission of Chinese cultures (and of political cultures) in the face of outside influences has become one of utmost academic and political importance. A number of concepts have also been proposed to understand this transmission. with tremendous attention paid to a variety of "cultural carriers" (Ch, *wenhua zaiti* 文化载体)—generally treated as objects and activities, and only very rarely including people—that ensure the spread (both intergenerational and geographical) of cultural values (see Thurston forthcoming). This concept has metastasized beyond the academic realm and now has prominence in political discourse as well, with considerable concern given to identifying and selecting the "carriers" that can pass on desirable traits in the PRC. A similar concept of "cultural genes" has also grown increasingly popular in the folkloristic and heritage world (Xing 2016, Anon 2022). The scientific metaphor of carriers and genes sets up a distinctly passive and almost eugenicist view of cultural transmission. If the right genes are selected and the conditions appropriately nurtured, the desired cultures and values will be transmitted regardless of whether or individual stakeholder efforts.

And yet, these definitions and studies continued to bother me. Not because of any inherent flaw in the research, so much as a sense that they did not quite address the questions I wanted to ask: why do people choose to pass on certain traditions? How can we understand the efforts of different stakeholders to create conditions for transmission to occur (or do the opposite), and what factors shape the amount of effort required of different

stakeholders. It is the question that began this article with my conversations in Yushu: the "work" that people must now do to ensure cultural transmission.

Toward a Folkloristic Definition of "Work"

Treating folklore as action is not new as the turn to practice theory demonstrates (Bronner 2012, Buccitelli and Schmitt 2016). Indeed, there is general acceptance that "folklore… ultimately depends on intense and continuing interaction." (Fine 2018, 6). Transmission is the result of sustained interaction over time, but this often seems increasingly difficult to achieve with all the demands on an individual's limited time and attention in modern life. Treating transmission as work recognizes that this interaction and the traditions that develop from it takes effort. Traditions take work to perform, transmit, and preserve. Without detracting anything from the aesthetic qualities that have drawn and captivated generations of audiences, none of it reaches the present without the dedicated efforts of individuals and communities. Without work to pass the traditions on. By work, I do not mean the abundant tradition of research on occupational lore and professional lore (Koch 2012), although I do not exclude it,[5] nor do I mean the activities to which "leisure" is an implied antonym (Abrahams 1978). Instead, I mean effort. Labor. The energy that goes into performing, re-presenting, transmitting, preserving, and displaying traditions.

The simplest physics definition treats "work" (W) as "a measure of energy transfer that occurs when an object is moved over a distance (d) by an external force (F)" resulting in the equation

$$W = Fd$$

[5] See, by way of briefest example, Tangherlini 1998, Schmidt 2013, and Gatling 2021.

Extending the scientific metaphor still further, a number of factors may also impinge on this. For example, increasing the distance an object is moved will also change the amount of energy involved. The greater the distance moved, the greater the energy required. An object's mass (*m*), meanwhile, will also affect the amounts of energy to move it the same distance. Lifting a heavy object requires more work than lifting a less heavy object as one works against the force of gravity (*g*).

$$W = mdg$$

Additionally, other forces—forces like resistance, friction,[6] etc.—will affect the amount of movement possible with the same amount of work. Sometimes these forces contradict each other or work at cross purposes, cancelling each other out. Friction, for example, increases the amount of applied force required to move an object while also enabling the movement in the first place.

Folklore is not physics (and thank goodness!), and extending this metaphor any further will quickly exhaust my limited understanding of the science, but this definition is actually more useful than it might at first appear. Change the words "object" to culture or tradition and "move" to "transmit" or "sustain," and a folkloristic definition of work might easily be built on much the same language as "the energy required to practice, perform, enact, and transmit a specific practice or a set of practices across both time (intergenerational transmission) and space (interregional transmission)." Like the forces of physics that influence the amount of work required to amount energy required to move an object, several forces have an effect on the transmission of traditions. These include, but should not be limited to, the resistance and friction of community ambivalence (or support),

[6] Here my use of these terms is more akin to their scientific definitions than Tsing's (2005) concept of 'friction' or Foucault's (1979) 'resistance.'

government policy, the inertia of communities and the momentum of existing transmission; centripetal forces of modern technologies and global capital that seem to draw every aspect of life toward themselves; the qualities and expectations (and potentially the fame) of individual tradition bearers, and the gravitational pulls of different local and world religions (including, I might suggest, the cult of digital technology).

The forces that shape the work required for cultural transmission are essentially neutral in and of themselves. Policy itself is not inherently good or bad for the future of a tradition, although certain policies will certainly have more positive or negative effects on this. For example, policies aimed at protecting intangible cultural heritage may promote the living transmission of traditions, but they also risk reifying once-dynamic and community-owned practices as a small, well-connected portion of the community takes over (Noyes 2006). Environmental policies might limit a bearer's ability to use traditional materials, or policies aimed at protecting cultural traditions may shape the incentives for traditions bearers in unforeseen ways. For other policies the effects on transmission are more obvious. For example, ethnic policies dispossessing territory, forbidding religious and linguistic practice, or boarding schools, have often wreaked intergenerational damage on the transmission of linguistic and cultural knowledge (Gregg 2018). These are just examples, and we could say similar things about world religions or digital technologies.

There is no need to try and measure the exact amount of force required to transmit a tradition under a given set of conditions, and I am not so much of a positivist as to try. Instead, It should be enough to try and assess the different forces affecting a tradition's vitality and the relative importance of each of these. When traditions disappear, we might say that individual bearers and communities have found the competing forces limiting transmission to be insurmountable, or perhaps that the tradition no longer holds enough

value to the new lifeways they have formed. But for the traditions that continue today, for those that at least a portion of the community still finds valuable, we might assess these forces in order to understand the "applied force" required of stakeholders—including individual artists, interested communities, and culture brokers—to maintain and transmit traditions. This, in turn, allows us to recognize that the applied force necessary has increased (or decreased) in recent years, and that this change should factor into interventions and engagement.

There is something that feels uncomfortably neoliberal about this use of the term "work." Transferring the burden of transmission that should be the responsibility of communities and of systems onto already-overstretched individuals is not ideal. After all, communities take work too, and in contexts where communities seem increasingly fragmented and under threat, passionate individuals can (must?) take it upon themselves to lower the barriers for others to engage with them. They must use their own energies—they must do work—so that it requires less energy of others.

But there is also something generative in the process. We change things through work, but the work also changes us (Kimmerer 2013). In the process, new formations and orientations are created for all involved. The different actors, learners, and audiences, become a "we." We become more invested in the projects, shaped by the engagements and relationships created with people and with traditions. We learn. We grow. We build connections and communities and obligations of reciprocity. The work also pushes us in different directions, opening new opportunities, and (sometimes) closing some doors.

Creating new futures. I see this with the efforts to transmit certain traditions within Tibetan communities of the People's Republic of China.[7]

Working to Transmit Traditions in Tibet

The Tibetan word for "work" *las* (pronounced *lee* in the regions where I work) is a *tha dad pa* verb, meaning that within the Tibetan language's system of ergativity, it is a class of verbs requiring the doer of the subject be explicitly marked with an agentive particle. *Las* is also, interestingly, the word Tibet's early translators selected to translate the Sanskrit term, "karma." It is an elegant translation, recognizing that our present circumstances are the result of our actions (our work) in previous lifetimes, and our actions in this life will change us, shaping the circumstances of this human life and of future rebirths. Though the idea of *karma* may cause some people to feel resigned to accept that current situations are the result of actions over which they have no control, it also provides a degree of agency: our actions, energies, and work in the present help to create the future.

Like *karma,* tradition is also, as Glassie (1995, 395) reminds us, future oriented, and work is needed in the present to ensure transmission in the future. But, the conditions of the Tibetan present shape the amount of work required for the transmission of tradition and the types of work possible: a complex political environment marked by both educational headwinds that seem to marginalize minority language education and testing in schools, a broader push towards orthodoxy and deemphasizing ethnic difference in religion and in many cultural displays. In this context, the space for doing the work of transmission is highly

[7] It should be noted that communities around the globe face similar issues. This includes, but is not limited to people of minoritized and indigenous communities. Passionate stakeholders and activists in these communities blaze their own trails on the terms that they understand best. The focus on Tibetans is not to say that these are the only people doing this work but reflects the fact that my own research to date has been primarily conducted in Tibetan communities.

constrained. Activities that might be acceptable in one moment or one jurisdiction, might see someone land in trouble with the authorities just a few months later, or one county over.

However, some traditions and their bearers have greater latitude for this work. In particular, the State's tremendous support for certain cultural practices that are officially recognized as "heritage," and (some) local governments supporting heritage as part of a broader project of economic development provide important tailwinds of cultural vitality. For traditions official recognized as "intangible cultural heritage" (whether within China or at the level of UNESCO), bearers and potential transmitters often have more leeway to do the "work" of cultural transmission. Together, these varying and dynamic forces create a space in which Tibetan cultural work is difficult to envision, essential to cultural vitality, and somehow possible if one is able to work carefully and cultivate the right relationships. Indeed, many people are actively engaging in and seeking their own ways of ensuring cultural transmission.

For the most part, this ongoing work focuses on individual cultural traditions and artists that the Chinese government recognizes as "intangible cultural heritage" and "inheritors" (Ch, *chuanchengren* 传承人) respectively.[8] Artists in Rebgong, for example, are actively undertaking and expanding their activities, moving from more family-oriented father-son instruction to the creation of large academies, ateliers dedicated to the production of painters and very expensive *thangka* paintings, a form of Buddhist art traditionally hung in family shrines, village temples, and monasteries, and used as part of meditation practice. Paintings finished and signed by the most famous artists regularly sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars. The oldest painters—those already regionally famous

[8] For more on the complex, multi-tiered system of recognition for traditions and their bearers, see Maags and Svensson 2018, and Maags and Holbig 2016.

when cultural heritage recognition began—are celebrated not only as “inheritors”, but as “masters” (Ch, *dashi* 大师) an officially conferred designation for artists, the full term of which is “Masters of Chinese Crafts and Arts” (Ch, Zhongguo gongyi meishu dashi 中国工艺美术大师).

For these painters and their students, the work of transmission lies almost exclusively in the efforts to teach and learn the techniques for drawing the divine beings at the center of the tradition, including precise rules governing the relative dimensions of every part of the body including the width of the mouth, the size of the ears, length from the crown of the head to the navel, etc. The precision required and the existence of historical texts providing this information means that the methods of instruction seem largely unchanged from historical times. Instead, the most evident change is in scale, and the only real foreseeable concern is environmental policy making some of the materials traditionally used to create the tradition’s vibrant colors impossible to obtain and requiring new alternatives. One artist, meanwhile, identified climate change as a potential threat as changing temperatures and precipitation levels in Tibet are affecting materials and the long-term preservation of artwork.

In Dzom nyag, where the *thangka* tradition remains vital—though much less famous and less lucrative than in Rebgong—the situation is more complicated. The paintings still provide a respectable income, but they do not sell for the eye-watering prices of the counterparts in Rebgong. People continue to learn the tradition, but it does not draw the huge number of multi-ethnic students that Rebgong *thangka* do. It remains a tradition more confined specifically to artists from a small village. Concerned about the tradition’s future, a group of activists—including painters, monks, and private citizens—are devoting their

energies to promote the region's artists by creating textbooks (Ngag dbang seng ge and Rma yon kun bzang chos grags 2021), opening shops at regional and national population centers, and arranging exhibitions and galleries in major Chinese cities where Buddhist devotees and art enthusiasts can purchase paintings. For this tradition, economic incentives seem to be the most important factor to keeping the tradition alive, making the work of transmission relatively easy. As one artist put it to me: "if there was no money then it would not be transmitted."

Art traditions and other traditions with some sort of tangible output seem especially ripe for this sort of commodification, but these methods will not work for many other traditions. For example, oral traditions, and their bearers, advocates, and caretakers face other issues. The people working to keep the Tibetan epic of King Gesar alive and relevant, are a case in point. In general, many bards, elders, and culture workers[9] feel that the tradition is under threat, and the efforts of Tibetan bards, who continue a centuries-long, unbroken transmission of the world's longest epic[10]—sometimes called the Tibetan national epic (Jabb 2022, Samuel 2002) illustrate how the types and amount of "work" required differs if there is to be any hope of creating a viable future for the tradition.

In Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, one of the heartlands of the epic tradition, the epic is beset with many issues. Changing language competences are one key threat. The region has long been denigrated for its substandard Tibetan language education (Zenz

[9] Culture worker is a broad a term referring broadly to State employees tasked with media creation as well as others engaged in cultural preservation and production who "are working within structures of power and organizations that are tied to and doing the work of national or commercial interests" (Abu-Lughod 1999, 113-114). In China, "culture workers" play an important role in mediating between state and communities. Though frequently treated as separate, it is worth noting that culture workers are frequently also community members.
[10] FitzHerbert (2010) contests this popular assertion, suggesting that it relies on creating a composite of all the dissimilar parts of each bard's unique performances in an ideal text that does not reflect any individual bard's repertoire. For more on the creation of ideal texts as part of a broader Chinese practice of textualizating and processing oral epics, see Bender 2019.

2014),[11] and the complex oral register, prosimetric shifts between speech and song, and the machine-gun-like rapid fire delivery of epic performance are incomprehensible even to many fluent speakers of the language. Further compounding this issue is that it has become increasingly difficult to win audience attention when they also have the attractions of television and social media so close at hand. One elder commented to me that the epic used to be like watching television for families, a primary source of entertainment whenever available (though always difficult to understand). Now few people show interest in the epic, and even fewer understand the performances. Many of those tasked with the epic's safeguarding feel that the epic—at least its bardic tradition at any rate—is certain to disappear before long. This is despite significant attempts to safeguard the Gesar epic tradition.

The epic has been central to government cultural preservation efforts dating back to the 1980s. In 2009, the epic was listed on the UNESCO convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage, and a massive, nationwide apparatus—including national, provincial, and even county level offices created to research, safeguard, and transmit the epic and staffed with dedicated people. This level of attention far exceeds that given to many other traditions. Current government efforts include creating and publishing textual versions of the epic, sponsoring and running *sgrung khang* 'epic houses' in certain counties and other spaces for performance of the epic both as bardic tradition and as opera, and providing many (but not all) officially recognized bards with a government salary. What is missing?

Some of the issues may be structural, policies that seem to marginalize Tibetan language education likely do little to help this situation. Similarly, safeguarding efforts that

[11] However in 2023 this may be changing, as university professors in Qinghai told me that their best students now come from the region, perhaps a legacy of the investment in the region after the 2010 earthquake.

tend to focus largely on the long form epic rather than the range of ways Tibetan epic knowledge penetrates so many different aspects of Tibetan life (see Thurston 2019). Resources certainly also pool at the metacultural level, with significant funding going to running the local offices and projects aimed at directing resources to painters who create *thangka* about the epic or calligraphers who create elegant new versions that will rarely be used. The government's overwhelming emphasis on inspired bards and largely focus on recording and their repertoires and creating textual versions surely do not help either. Inspiration cannot be taught, and so the government devotes little effort to training new generations of performers. Nevertheless, it is clear that current government work is simply not enough. Greater inputs are required to ensure meaningful transmission of this incredibly complex performance tradition.

Some bards have taken it upon themselves to devote their own energies to filling the gaps. The activities of 'Chi med rab brtan, an inspired bard and a "national level inheritor" of the Gesar epic (Ch, *guojiaji chuancheng ren*, T, *rgyal khab rim pa rgyun 'dzin pa*), provide an interesting insight into some of the types of work that may be helpful beyond those under the umbrella of the State. When not performing, this extremely energetic young bard (b. 1998) speaks with a quiet intensity that hums with passion for the epic, and this extends into online and offline activities (to the extent that such a distinction can be made). Firstly, he assists government efforts by recording and publishing textual versions of his telling of the epic. Recognizing that many of those most interested in the epic are less literate, he also sells recordings of his performances on USBs.

The books and USBs always sell out quickly, though it is less certain that people actually engage with these. Many people undoubtedly plug the USBs into portable speakers or listen to them over the sound systems in their vehicles, but many others (especially the

books), function more like “power objects” (Gentry 2019), sitting unused in household shrines, generating auspicious circumstances by virtue of their presence. Easier to measure are the performances that he and many of his peers give on livestreaming applications *kuaishou* and *douyin*—the former commonly used in pastoral communities (Tsering Samdrup 2023) and the latter being the Chinese version of ByteDance’s TikTok. Any between dozens and hundreds of viewers regularly tune into livestreams, and many others watch them back after the fact. Livestreaming, meanwhile, allows the bards to reach audiences beyond their immediate community, breaking barriers of physical and geographic immediacy long considered part of the performance event.[12]

Perhaps most interesting of ‘Chi med rab brtan’s activities though, is his *rgyun ‘dzin ‘dzin grwa* ‘transmission class,’ a class he endeavors to teach independently and ostensibly with no assistance from the government. He teaches about the characters of the epic, he teaches the basic plot, and he teaches the primary melodies of the song portions and the characters with which they are associated. Together these activities seek to create a “fluent audience” of the epic (Thurston 2020, cf. Foley 2002), and continue to make the epic relevant in the lives of young people. The work is ongoing and only possible with ‘Chi med rab brtan’s relentless dedication. Others around the Tibetan Plateau are also taking part in similar efforts. Bards from other areas stream performances and chant the epic. Sometimes, bards from different regions will face off online in a “PK” performance, sharing the same livestreaming space for their fans (Tsering Samdrup 2023). In order to keep King Gesar relevant as a feature of Tibetan religious life as well, one bard has recently begun offering free texts of a fumigation offering prayer dedicated to King Gesar. Movies made based on

[12] For more on how modern social media can be viewed as a potential tool for linguistic minatnenance among minoritized communities in China, see Yulha lhawa 2019.

Gesar opera circulate in local shops and online. Some have floated the idea of an animated Gesar epic. It may still not be enough to keep the epic alive, but it is doing more than other efforts to keep the epic relevant to new generations of audiences.

Chi med rab brtan's example demonstrates a principle that is, I believe, at the heart of the "work" of cultural transmission: presence. Day and night he devotes his energies and his hours to ensuring the epic's relevance to Tibetan communities through his own presence (aural, physical, and virtual) in people's lives and attentions. By this I mean both that he tries to ensure the epic's presence and relevance in people's lives, and that he is himself present in people's lives for them to engage with the epic.

Presence and Attendance

It is all well and good to say that cultural "work"—defined, again, as "the energy required to practice, perform, enact, and transmit a specific practice or a set of practices across both time and space"—is at the heart of transmission. But there are only 24 hours in a day, and we (whether public folklorists, professors, museum professionals, community members, or some combination of these identities) only have a finite amount of energy. How can individuals do this work while also navigating the pressures and often contradictory requirements of, for example, modern life, economic necessities, child-rearing, and the attention-stealing allure of modern media? This question is of paramount importance for both stakeholders and potential brokers (Kurin 1997) who wish to work with community members.

More fundamentally, doing this work and expending our energies is an act of presence, and people often must make choices about where they wish to be present and how much they wish to be present in different communities. For an academic, it may include

questions of joining the faculty committee or coaching a child's soccer team that practices at the same time. Just within the narrower confines of the job description, will you write the grant application or devote more time to preparing classes (or any of the myriad other responsibilities we take on or have imposed upon us). These choices require prioritizing different communities and different interventions. It may include trying to work with tradition bearers to the develop culturally appropriate interventions or creating displays to introduce new audiences to a dying art, or even working at a higher level of scale to shape the views of regional and national policy makers. An epic bard, meanwhile, might choose between activities to make their tradition more visible to a broader portion of the Tibetan world or to seek income in more lucrative activities like digging the medicinal herb *Ophiocordyceps sinensis*, commonly called simply "the bug" in the local language.[13] Or any number of other things that might require time and attention on any given day.

Beyond such mundane and worldly issues, questions of presence may also require navigating the conflicting discourses, expectations, and requirements of different bodies based in vastly different epistemes. Makley (2013 and 2018) for example, describes how Tibetan community members navigate between a worldview based on local numina and the scientific worldview of the developmentalist Chinese State. In some cases, it is a zero-sum game and tradition bearers or others must choose one or the other, or they learn to present themselves differently in different contexts. State-employed culture workers, meanwhile, may be tasked with prioritizing one over the other or somehow squaring circles, regardless

[13] "Caterpillar fungus" (T, *dbyar rtswa dgun 'bu,* Ch, *dongchong xiacao*) is an important source of income for many families on the Tibetan Plateau (see Sulek 2016 and Yeh and Lama 2013). Though it is sometimes said that it is taboo for bards to harvest caterpillar fungus, more than one bard has told me that they do this (Thurston 2020).

of their beliefs. Implied in this is that presence in one community, sometimes requires absence from others (see Ingram, Mullins, and Richardson 2019).

This suggestion of presence very closely approximates Bender's (forthcoming 2024) concept of attendance, defined as

> "Attention paid to local traditions by local transmitters or 'care-takers' who seek to continue certain aspects of culture ('traditions') and invest time and energy in doing so, often without tangible rewards. These efforts are made informally or formally by individual actors or groups of actors expressing extended concern over the maintenance, in some form, of cherished local phenomena…"

It seems interesting that both Bender's "presence" and my theory of "work," these ideas come out of the same research context of the People's Republic of China, though perhaps less surprising when realizing that he was my dissertation supervisor and remains an important interlocutor. Bender's use of the term 'care-takers' is also important, as it reminds of the vast array of stakeholders who may have an interest and role in continuing traditions. While the article has thus far focused on either outside academics or tradition bearers, "care-takers" can also include local literati (see, for example, You 2020), poets (Bender 2024), translators, and academics from local and regional institutions. All of these play an important role in devoting their energies to one practice or set of practices, and thereby shaping the amount of energy required of others to become involved.

Such a definition comes very close to the concept of work I am developing here. Work requires workers, and work of cultural transmission needs the efforts of "transmitters" and caretakers to both be present in communities themselves, and to keep their traditions present and relevant in people's lives. When 'Chi med rab brtan teaches his 'transmission

class,' and creates opportunities for young people to engage with the epic, he is being present in the communities, attending to the tradition. When a local fan takes it upon himself to open a shop selling Dzom Nyag *thangka* paintings and organizing exhibitions in major Chinese cities, he is devoting his energies and his presence to the tradition's vitality.

The presence being described here is most often physical (but not exclusively so). The bonds of physical co-presence are often essential to maintaining the bonds that keep communities alive. The same principles also apply for folklorists working in communities. Co-presence, so essential to the ethnographic co-creation of knowledge, is part of building and maintaining relationships necessary for cultural performance and is an essential part of the "work" of being involved in transmitting traditions.[14] In the 21st century, however, this presence is increasingly virtual as well. The livestreaming bards remind us that presence and attendance, may well also occur online to reach new generations and to break the spatial boundedness of oral performance to reach increasingly fragmented communities spread across China and the world.

Conclusion

"People these days are lazy," one Tibetan elder told me in the context of a conversation that revolved largely around parenting, education, and linguistic and cultural transmission. Later, the same person said, "The farmers don't work the fields, and the nomads don't herd their cattle." More than a mere "trope of indolence" about the Tibetan people (Yeh 2013), or more specifically about a younger generation of urban Tibetans no longer interested in the old ways, it also speaks to a degree of hopelessness I have seen from

[14] For more on co-presence in ethnographic research, see Fabian 2006 and Chua 2015.

many and with which I also began this article. Many people feel that the current trends of language shift and disinterest in traditions feel irreversible. But this is only true if people believe it to be so and therefore stop working.

In this article, I have developed a conception of "work" as "energy needed to perform, learn, transmit a cultural across generations and regions," and suggested that work is at the heart of cultural transmission. I have argued that folklorists (especially public folklorists and other heritage workers), can influence the amount of energy needed from tradition bearers in shaping interventions. Tradition bearers, too, can influence the amount of time and energy other community members need to invest to transmit traditions. Less clear are the reasons people choose to prioritize performing and transmitting a particular tradition over any number of other possible activities. It includes personal and group identity, a tradition's place within the community at a given moment, a person's vision for the tradition's potential place in a community's future), broader societal incentives and attitudes (or lack thereof), and more.

Lest this article seem too optimistic, perhaps, I should also end on a note of caution. In Tibetan areas of China, heritage often takes the "work" of culture out of the community instead of complementing community work. In the case of the Gesar epic, it often requires bards to take up residence in local government seats (Thurston 2020), moves traditional performance to officially sanctioned spaces, focuses on entextualization, and de-emphasizes other issues like audiences, faith, and more. For painters, it focuses on the increasing production and prices, often through sales to wealthy patrons. This is not necessarily working to ensure "living transmission" of traditions recognized as "heritage." Key to the "work" of cultural transmission, then, is presence: the physical and virtual spaces and

communities where individuals choose to be present and invest their time, capital, and energies in the transmission of traditions.

I have only selected two examples here, and each has been examined only too briefly, but the contrasts that they suggest can also help to think about how an approach to cultural transmission as work can help to consider how tradition bearers and culture workers. Money alone will not solve the problem. Investments of time and energy in community and tradition are essential. The types of attendance and the amount of energy required of stakeholders and culture workers, however, is unique to the tradition and the types of outcomes tradition bearers, communities, and other stakeholders seek.

Calling it "work" does an injustice, in some ways, to the tremendous skill and artistry of contemporary tradition bearers. They have learned and continue the aesthetic qualities of tradition that make it so vital and compelling to audiences and to us as researchers (Noyes 2014). In performance, the tradition often looks easy. But calling it work is important, so as not to elide over the very intentional efforts required of individual stakeholders to effectively transmit and maintain many traditions. Especially in modern contexts, it requires people who do the tradition, teach a class, stream the performance, seek out students, and collaborate with cultural workers.

REFERENCES

Abrahams, Roger D. 1978. Towards a Sociological Theory of Folklore: Performing Services. *Western Folklore.* 37(3), 161-184.

Abu-Lughod, Lila. 1999. The Interpretation of Culture(s) after Televeision. In The Fate of "Culture." Edited by Sherry B. Ortner, 110-135. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Anonymous. 2022. *Guojia shehui kexue jijin yishuxue zhongda xiangmu "Zhongguo wenhua jiyin de chuancheng yu dangdai biaoda yanjiu" zai Tianjin daxue kaiti.* 国家社会科学基金艺术学重大项目《中国文化基因的传承与当代表达研究》在天津大学开题。[National Social Science Foundation Arts Important Project "Research on the Transmission and the Contemporary Expression of Chinese Cultural Genes" Proposed at Tianjin University) https://news.tju.edu.cn/info/1012/59709.htm last accessed 6 August 2024.

Bauman, Richard. 1986. *Story, Performance, and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Narrative.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bauman, Richard. 2008. The Philology of the Vernacular. *Journal of Folklore Research.* 45(1): 29-36.

Bender, Mark. 2019. Co-creations, Master Texts, and Monuments; Long Narrative Poems of Ethnic Minority Groups in China. *CHINOPERL.* 38(2): 65-90.

--. Forthcoming (2024). The Winged Ones: Translating Aku Wuwu's Poetic Worlds. *Cultural Analysis.*

Berger, Jonah and Katherine L Milkman. 2012. What Makes Online Content Viral. *Journal of Marketing Research.* XLIX(April 2012): 192-205.

Bronner, Simon. 2012. Practice Theory in Folklore and Folklife Studies. *Folklore.* 123: 23-47.

Buccitelli, Anthony Bak and Casey Schmitt. 2016. Everyday Practice and Tradition: New Directions for Practice Theory in Ethnology and Folkloristics. *Cultural Analysis.* 15: 1-15.

Cantwell, Robert. 1993. *Ethnomimesis: Folklife and the Representation of Culture.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Cashman, Ray. 2008. *Storytelling on the Northern Irish Border: Characters and Community.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Chua, Liana. 2015. Troubled Landscapes, troubling anthropology: co-presence, necessity and the making of ethnographic knowledge. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.)*. 23: 641-659.

Dégh, Linda and Andrew Vaszonyi. 1975. The Hypothesis of Multi-Conduit Transmission in Folklore. In *Folklore: Performance and Communication,* edited by Dan Ben-Amos and Kenneth S. Goldstein, pp. 207-252. Boston: De Gruyter Mouton.

Fabian, Johannes. 2006. The Other Revisited: Critical Afterthoughts. *Anthropological Theory.* 6(2): 139-152.

Fine, Dan. 2018. The Folklore of Small Things: Tradition in Group Culture. *Western Folklore.* 77(1): 5-27.

Fishman, Joshua. 2006. *Do NOT Leave Your Language Alone: The Hidden Status Agendas within Corpus Planning in Language Policy.* Routledge.

FitzHerbert, Solomon George. 2010. 2010. A Modern Version of the Birth of Gesar. In *Tibetan Studies: An Anthology*, edited by Saadet Arslan and Peter Schwieger, 215-54. Halle: International Institute for Tibetan and Buddhist Studies GmbH.

Foley, John Miles. 2002. How to Read an Oral Poem. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Foucault, Michel. 1979. *Discipline and Punish.* New York: Vintage Books.

Gatling, Benjamin. "" How Can You Trust a Country?": Precarity, Personal Narrative, and Occupational Folklore among Afghan Refugees in the US." *Journal of Folklore Research* 58.3 (2021): 53-75.

Glassie, Henry. 1995. “Tradition.” *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 108, no. 430, 1995, pp. 395–412.

Glassie, Henry. 2020. *Daniel Johnston: A Portrait of the Artist as a Potter in North Carolina.* Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Ingram, Shelley, Willow G. Mullins, and Todd Richardson. 2019. *Implied Nowhere: Absence in Folklore Studies.* Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.

Goffman, Erving. 1956. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life.* Edingburgh: University of Edinburgh Social Sciences Research Centre.

Gregg, Matthew T. "The long-term effects of American Indian boarding schools." *Journal of Development Economics* 130 (2018): 17-32.

Hasan-Rokem, Galit. 2016. Ecotypes: Theory of the Lived and Narrated Experience. *Narrative Cultures.* 3(1): Article 6.

Jabb, Lama. 2022. "Currents of the Tibetan National Epic in Contemporary Writing." In *The Many Faces of King Gesar*, edited by Matthew T. Kapstein and Charles Ramble, pp. 265-296. Leiden: Brill.

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. 2013. *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Milkweed Editions.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. 2004. “Intangible Heritage as Metacultural Production. *Museum International.* 56(1-2): 52-65.

Koch, Gertraud. 2012. “Work and Professions,”*A Companion to Folklore*, edited by Regina F. Bendix and Galit Hasan-Rokem, pp. 154-168. Malden MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Kurin, Richard. 1997. *Reflections of a Culture Broker: A View from the Smithsonian*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.

Maags, Christina and Marina Svensson, eds. 2018. *Chinese Heritage in the Making: Experience, Negotiations, and Contestations.* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Maags, Christina and Heike Holbig. 2016. Replicating Elite Dominance in Intangible Cultural Heritage Safeguarding: The Role of Local Government-Scholar Networks in China. *International Journal of Cultural Property.* 23: 71-97.

Makley, Charlene. 2013. The politics of presence: Voice, Deity Possession, and Dilemmas of Development Among Tibetans in the People's Republic of China. *Comparative Studies in Society and History.* 55(3): 665-700.

--. 2018. *The Battle for Fortune: State-led Development, Personhood, and Power among Tibetans in China.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Ngag dbang seng ge and Rma yon kun bzang chos grags. 2021. *'Dzom nyag lha bzo'I bslab deb* འཛོམ་ཉག་ལྷ་བཟོའི་བསླབ་དེབ། *Zang niang tang ka hui ha jiaocheng* 藏娘唐卡绘画教程 [Textbook of 'Dzom nyag religious art]. Lan gru'u: Kansu'u mi rigs dpe skrun khang.

Noyes, Dorothy. 2003a. *Fire in the Plaça: Catalan Politics after Franco.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

--. 2003b. "Group." In *Eight Words for the Study of Expressive Culture*, edited by Burt Feintuch, pp 7-4. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

--. 2006. The Judgement of Solomon: Global Protections for Tradition and the Problems of Community Ownership. *Cultural Analysis.* 5: 27-56.

--. 2009. Tradition: The Three Traditions. *Journal of Folklore Research.* 46(3): 233-268.

--. 2014. Aesthetic is the Opposite of Anaesthetic. *Journal of Folklore Research.* 51(2): 125-175.

Richardson, Thomas Grant, Jon Kay, Maida Owens, and Tim Frandy. 2023. “Urgencies” in the Field: Three Perspectives. *Journal of American Folklore.* 136(540):181-198.

Samuel, Geoffrey. 2002. The epic and nationalism in Tibet. in *Religion and Biography in China and Tibet*, ed. Benjamin Penny, pp. 178–220. new york: curzon.

Schmidt, Claire. 2013. “There’s Nothing Funny About Prisons”: Corrections Workers, Laughter, and Unlaughter. *Western Folklore.* 72(3-4): 355-367.

Sims, Martha C. and Martine Stephens. 2011. *Living Folklore: An Introduction to the Study of People and their Traditions.* Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.

Sulek, Emilia Roza. 2016. Caterpillar Fungus and the Economy of Sinning: On Entangled Relations between Religious and Economimc in a Tibetan Pastoral Region of Golog, Qinghai, China. *Etudes Mongoles et Sibériennes, Centrasiatqiues et Tibétaines.* 47.

Tangherlini, Timothy. 1998. *Talking Trauma*. Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press.

Thurston, Timothy. 2019. “The Tibetan Gesar Epic Beyond its Bards: An Ecosystem of Genres on the Roof of the World.” *Journal of American Folklore***.** 132(524): 115-136.

--. 2020. “Assessing the Sustainability of the Gesar Epic in Northwest China, Thoughts from Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture.” *Cultural Analysis.* 17(2):1-23.

--. forthcoming. Wenhua zaiti ‘Cultural Carriers’ as an important concept for understanding PRC cultural trends in the 21st century. *Western Folklore.*

Tsering Samdrup. 2023. “Kuaishou, a new lifeline for Tibetan oral cultures in China?” *The Tibetan Sustainable Heritage Initiative Blog.* https://tashi.leeds.ac.uk/kuaishou-a-new-lifeline-for-tibetan-oral-cultures-in-china/, 19 April 2023, last accessed 13 July 2024.

Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. 2005. *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Tylor, Edward Burnett. 1871. *Primitive Cultures: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom.* London: John Murray.

Ward, Shannon Mary. Forthcoming, 2024. *Amdo Lullaby: An Ethnography of Childhood and Language Shift on the Tibetan Plateau*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Xing, Li 邢莉. 2016. Minzu wenhua de shuxing zai renzhi yu wenhua jiyin de chuancheng 民族文化的属性再认知与文化基因的传承 [Recognition of Ethnic culture and the Transmission of Cultural Genes]. Zhongyuan wenhua yanjiu 中原文化研究 [Research on the Culture of the Central Plains). 2016(1): 56-62.

Yeh, Emily T.S. 2007. Tropes of Indolence and the Cultural Politics of Development. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers.* 97(3): 593-612.

Yeh, Emily T and Kunga T Lama. 2013. Following the caterpillar fungus: nature, commodity chains, and the place of Tibet in China's uneven geographies. *Social & Cultural Geographies.* 14(3): 318-340.

You, Ziying. 2020. *Folk Literati, Contested Tradition, and Heritage in Contemporary China: Incense is Kept Burning.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Yulha Lhawa. 2019. Language revitalization, video, and mobile social media: A case study from the Khroskyabs language amongst Tibetans in China. *Language Documentation and Conservation.* 13: 564-579.

Zenz, Adrian. 2014. *'Tibetanness' Under Threat? Neo-Integrationism, Minority Education and Career Choices in Qinghai, P.R. China.* Leiden: Global Oriental.

Zhang, Juwen. 2022. *Oral Traditions in Contemporary China: Healing a Nation.* Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.